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CII proposal

The existential challenge of our time is that although large-scale thermonuclear war is acknowledged by all to be the ultimate catastrophe and to be unthinkable, it has not been made impossible.

Quite the contrary: enormously expensive and highly organized preparations are made each year and programmed for years in the future to alert the two superpowers to evidence of events that would supposedly warrant deliberately initiating it, and in those circumstances to executing warplans, elaborated years in advance, for waging thermonuclear war and attempting, despite all disclaimers, to "win" it.

Other catastrophes loom, lesser only by comparison with this one: global warming, ozone depletion. (They threaten enormous disruption and loss of life: but not the end of organized life in the Northern Hemisphere or the possible extinction of life on earth). They differ in resulting from the unorganized activity of millions of institutions and individuals in their daily affairs. The preparations for thermonuclear war are highly planned and hierarchically organized.

And the war itself can be set in motion by a single individual: the political leader of the US or the Soviet Union. Or if we take into account the possibility of catalytic action, initiatives, authorized or not, by subordinates in the chain of nuclear command or by leaders or subordinates in lesser nuclear states that could set off the nuclear machinery of the two superpowers, the number of individuals who might trigger a large-scale exchange is in the hundreds or thousands.

For a number of years I have been haunted by the thought: I live in a society that is preparing a catastrophe.

What do we mean by "possible"? Many who acknowledge that the probability that this system, potentially explosive by design, will actually explode is greater than zero, still think of this probability as extremely low, on the order of estimates that reigned for many years for the probability of a core meltdown in a nuclear reactor: say, 1/1000,000,000,000.... Acceptably low. Those, of course, are the estimates that used to be made, before Three Mile Island and Chernobyl.

Those estimates were of the same order as estimates of the chance of a failure of an aerospace shuttle flight, before the Challenger explosion. Or estimates by the oil industry of a catastrophic oil spill in the Alaskan Sound, before the Exxon Valdez.

The Cuban Missile Crisis was the practical equivalent to Three Mile Island: not the feared, ultimate catastrophe--indeed, only one person died--but a dress rehearsal for it, a near-miss. Yet this event did not lead to an urgent reconsideration or reevaluation upward of the real risks of nuclear war (despite extreme, probably exaggerated anxiety among the public in the US and much of the rest of the world during the crisis itself).

[Why not? --Like Hiroshima, the crisis was associated with a great American victory that immediately followed it: the success overshadowed and seemed to justify the preceding decisions.

--Information on the decision-making preceding and during the crisis--again, like Hiroshima but unlike TMI and the other disasters--was classified and remained highly secret for a generation.

--Thus, for both the above reasons, there was no public investigation (unlike, say, Pearl Harbor or the MacArthur hearings).

--There was almost no study of the incident and its risks even within the government: except for mine, there was only the WSEG study (extremely closely held within the JCS, even from the SecDef); and the three studies in CIA focussing on the intelligence failure).

--High-level accounts did emerge in the '60's which appeared both comprehensive and reassuring: highly laudatory, in particular, of the President's decision-making (by his official historian, his speech-writer, and his brother). In retrospect these accounts have proven extremely inadequate and misleading, in some respects deliberately so. But even some of the most recent accounts--still, by the President's Assistant for National Security, and by scholars at the Kennedy School, who have accepted too credulously assertions by Kennedy's officials--retain this tone of reassurance, and in particular, high appreciation of the President's role and command of events. According to these interpretations, the public's fears at the time--and in the more recent accounts, even the President's reported concerns--were greatly overwrought.

--Much emphasis has been put on the way the international system has changed since then--in part, as the result of the crisis--in ways that make a replay unlikely and, if it occurred, less dangerous.

I was myself a second-level participant in the latter stage of the crisis--serving on working-groups staffing the ExComm in the last six of the "thirteen days." My own estimate at the time of

the risk that the crisis would explode in large-scale nuclear war was, unlike the public's (and, I later learned, my bosses') estimate, extremely low: as I now see it, very much too low. But I did think then that I had experienced the way in which thermonuclear war would come about, if it ever did. This was in great contrast to the model of war initiation that had preoccupied me for several previous years as a RAND employee and consultant to the Secretary of Defense and White House, during which I had drafted the official Kennedy guidance for the war plans for general nuclear war.

That had focussed primarily on the possibility of a Soviet surprise nuclear attack on the US: secondarily, on war arising from a deliberate Soviet decision to blockade Berlin or to invade Western Europe. In the fall of 1961 I had learned that the Soviets had not made the effort we had supposed to acquire an ICBM force remotely capable of surprise attack; and when the US revealed to the Soviets our new awareness of this reality--in a speech I myself proposed and drafted--the Berlin crisis of that year appeared to subside.

Yet one year later the Cuban Missile Crisis recalled me to an awareness that nuclear war was, nevertheless, still possible, by a route different from what I and my colleagues had earlier supposed: a path of miscalculations on both sides, actions unforeseen much earlier by either, ill-understood in their effects by the actor, in their intent by its opponent and in their interaction by both, choices by each that an informed observer could properly judge reckless and misguided, defining together a course toward war like that which determined the outbreak of World War I.

I determined to study this episode with the best access to information that could be achieved, to discover the faults in a system that had permitted us to come this close to a war that, surely, neither side had earlier intended or desired.

For over six months in 1964 I did arrange to study this and related crises, with high-level access that had little precedent. [Before I could write out a report of my findings, I was invited to join the government in a role that, I anticipated correctly, would let me observe from the inside a comparable process: the escalation of our intervention in Vietnam. My initial desire simply to add to my understanding drew me into a ten-year involvement, first as an accomplice then as a resister, in a tragic and criminal war.] Much of the most relevant information I gained has not yet ever been released elsewhere, over a quarter-century later. In a number of respects it drastically affects "lessons" that have been drawn as recently as this year: it is clearly time that this information become more generally available.